

The Three Faces of Social Inequality: State Domination, Economic Exploitation, Cultural Binaries - A Short Essay in Honour of Russell King

Faist, Thomas

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Thomas Faist*

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University of Bielefeld
Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD)
Postfach 100131
D-33501 Bielefeld
Homepage: http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/tdrc/ag_comcad/

The Three Faces of Social Inequality: State Domination, Economic Exploitation, Cultural Binaries

A Short Essay in Honour of Russell King

Thomas Faist

In „Producing transnational space: international migration and the extra-territorial reach of state power“ (2014), Russell King and his co-author, Michael Collyer, argue that transnational social spaces are produced at the intersection of state control and migrant practices. They claim that „... transnational space is produced through the interplay of the activities of international migrants and state action“ (2014: 8), in light of „the hegemonic “mastery of space” of state institutions“ (2014: 14). As an example, Russell King focuses on how „European border control regimes produce inequalities“ (2014: 3)ⁱ through „... direct control of physical space, discursive control of imaginative space, lined by a symbolic control of transnational spaces invested with a particular value“ (2014: 9). To my own thinking, this way of conceptualising the production of inequalities is truly inspiring. Not only is the article a fine example of how Russell King is able to think synthetically, integrating geographical notions of space with insights from political science on state control, from the pioneers in anthropology on transnationalism and from sociology on the importance of the social construction of binaries for the (re)production of inequalities. As to the latter, King observes that Migration Studies abounds with binaries: „... sending/receiving, home/host, emigration/immigration ... forced/voluntary, internal/international, refugee/economic migrant, permanent/temporary“ (2014: 7). Russell King’s work on transnationalism goes beyond the meaning of „trans“ as connecting across national borders and moves towards a wider understanding which refers not only to ties (material, symbolic etc.) across borders but to a new way of thinking conceptually.

Russell King and his co-author see in state control a main source producing inequalities in Europe, in particular in border controls along the Mediterranean. In the words of Featherstone and others, „By spatialities we mean the diverse ongoing connections and networks that bind different parts of the world together and that are constituted through (and in fact constitute) particular sites and places“ (2007: 383–4). In my own work, I use transnational space – a third space – as a notion which helps to capture the very different worlds between which international migration and other forms of spatial mobility usually occur. In this work I am interested in what I call the socio-cultural question, which emphasises both control and contestation of power in the constitution of inequalities.

Russell King’s approach to migration and state control as a particular form of power can be expanded. There are three forms of meta-mechanisms of power and inequality in a

transnational world: state authority and domination, exploitation and oppression. The first, on *state authority*, refers to the claim of mostly nation-states to exercise the monopoly of power of a territory and a corresponding population. Border control at physical check points along a borderline, but also within the territory and abroad – “remote control” in Aristide Zolberg’s felicitous phrase (Zolberg 2003) – constitutes an integral part of state domination. The state control of borders has expanded and tightened; the main examples are the spread of the passport to perform acts of identity after World War One, or the linkage of border control with the development cooperation of adjoining countries by the European Union in the past twenty years. The second mechanism is *exploitation*. It has been well described by Karl Marx as the appropriation of the value added by the worker through the capitalist. In a nutshell, exploitation is the use of an economic resource, in this case labour power, for ethically unacceptable purposes. This mechanism has remained in place ever since the advent of industrialisation and has not lost significance with the growing contestation of a third metamechanism, *oppression*. Conflicts around oppression refer to heterogeneities, such as ethnicity, gender and religion. It is often that such heterogeneities are used in a binary sense to create and maintain inequalities: black/white, man/woman, citizen/alien, etc. (Tilly 1998) – subsequently, contestation of such exclusionary labels revolves around binary cultural heterogeneities.

Migration often connects very unequal parts of the world, notably certain destinations in the global South with selected ones in the global North. Migration and, more generally, various forms of mobility, are crucial research sites not only for understanding the interdependence of various parts of the world – examples include the transfer of jobs from high-wage to low-wage regions in the garment industry, or the social consequences of climate change and international migration – but also for analysing how agents in very concrete ways straddle various locations and deal with social inequalities. From a transnational perspective it is not only the transnationality of migrants and non-migrants which is at stake but the broader context in which the inequalities of resources, status and power underlie and (indirectly) cause migration and the ways in which inequalities are (re)produced during migration and settlement processes. To the extent that the inequalities involved become a matter of public dispute and political contention, we can speak of a global socio-cultural question – a combination of that global socio-cultural question which focuses on exploitation and the cultural question emphasising the deleterious effects of oppression. This socio-cultural question pertains to the perception and interpretation of social inequalities as, first, illegitimate and, second, politicised. Both conditions are necessary in order to speak of a (global) socio-cultural question. The transnational character of migration is one of the strategic research sites for the study of the global socio-cultural question; other possibilities include, for example, campaigns for social standards and social labels.

The three meta-mechanisms or faces of inequality have come to form an assemblage in a cumulative way: exploitation has been a hallmark of control and contestation of and by workers since the industrialisation which has spread unequally around the world since the nineteenth century. And, with World War One, passports as a shorthand for the state control of cross-border mobility have come to characterise population movements ever since. With the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, sometimes called „new“ social movements, various aspects of oppression, going beyond exploitation, have been visible in public contestation; the civil rights and women's movements are only the most prominent, with the movements of migrants claiming rights (e.g. the irregular status of migrants) being among them.

In the nineteenth century, the „social question“ was the central subject of extremely volatile political conflicts between the ruling classes and the working-class movements in various parts of the world. In the twenty-first century, the social question is different from that of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth.

First, state control and national statehood have spread across the globe. The nation-state is considered as the legitimate form of political organisation. Very fundamentally, states have sought to discredit or co-opt other agents of border control, such as brokers (Faist 2014a). Moreover, at least in Europe, there is the welfare state, which moderated social conflicts around (re)distribution quite successfully in the first thirty years after World War Two. Although there has been a transformation of the welfare state since the 1980s, with first the neo-conservative and then the neo-liberal revolutions, which have resulted in a restriction of rights and benefits, the middle classes have not entered into open revolt but have been engaged in a politics of fear or anxiety over the national. The welfare state has caged in social conflicts on a national scale, and still seems able to do so. Thus, there is a dichotomisation of internal and external, with the welfare state as a main mechanism of social closure toward the outside.

The importance of statehood and attendant membership status can be seen globally. In the nineteenth century, class was determining life chances, though location mattered. In 1870, about 50 per cent of income differences were attributable to class position, about 10 per cent to location. The picture looks very different in the year 2000: class still matters, but location has gained in prominence: some 50 to 60 per cent of income differences between individuals in the world is due simply to the mean income differences between the countries where people live; about 20 to 30 per cent is made up of the class position. The increasing importance of location has been called „citizenship rent“ (Milanovic 2011).

Second, there is the politicisation of multiple heterogeneities around processes of oppression. In the nineteenth century, the conflict between capital and labour, in class terms, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, at times subsumed most other socio-economic

and political struggles. Nowadays, public debates and conflicts revolve around multiple heterogeneities, of which gender, ethnicity, and race are only the most prominent. The latter are not new heterogeneities but have gained more momentum in the wake of the new social movements of the 1970s and other processes, such as international migration. Some of these heterogeneities, such as gender, ethnicity and race, have also risen to prominence in public policies aimed at addressing inequalities such as affirmative action, thus connecting to the first face of inequality, state domination.

Third, exploitation has not simply lost its importance in determining life chances, especially when viewed within national states. Yet, nowadays, we focus much more on how class intersects with heterogeneities such as gender, ethnicity or age – often such heterogeneities are socially constructed as binaries, and consider gender or race (Faist 2014b). Cultural binaries interplay with statehood in ambiguous ways. In the twenty-first century, nation-states are „competition states“ (Cerny 1997) concerned not only about gaining brains from abroad but also about the emigration of their own so-called highly qualified citizenworkers. While the term „brain drain“ in the 1970s denoted the exodus of highly skilled labour from so-called developing to economically developed countries, it has now entered the discussions of OECD countries with regard to its geographically mobile citizens. As to heterogeneities, „migration background“ – as the family experience is called in Germany – is considered by some companies as a boon to boost „diversity“ and conduct business across the globe, drawing on the cultural competencies of their employees. Once-considered private skills, such as language, become economic insider advantages in the realm of companies. At the same time, ethnicity or gender are still connected to disadvantages in income or status.

Inspired by King's and Collyer's idea that transnational spaces are produced at the intersection of state control and migratory practices, I include state control in addition to economic exploitation and cultural oppression to paint a broad picture of global inequalities. Migration is thus an ideal field in which to probe into the production of social inequalities around the globe. In this context, transnational space is a conceptual tool to probe beyond container units such as national states or national societies. It is a „thirdspace“ much needed to obtain a distanced view of concepts which are too often treated as if they were selfunderstood. The same applies to the use of binaries. Not only are they politically unsustainable, as bel hooks (1990) and Homi Bhabha (1994), among others, have prominently pointed out. We also need to go beyond for the sake of working with social scientific concepts that critically reflect notions of political conflict.

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ⁱ King also speaks of „the power geometries of inequality“ (Collyer and King 2012: 5), in a Working Paper which is a sort of precursor to the article mentioned here.